



**Uwajimaya
Seattle, Washington**

Uwajimaya is a name familiar to many Pacific Northwest residents. The largest Asian grocery and gift market in the Pacific Northwest, Uwajimaya is one of the top 100 privately held companies in Washington State.

The store started in Tacoma, Washington in 1928 when Fujimatsu Moriguchi sold fresh fish cakes and groceries from the back of his truck to Japanese laborers working in logging and fishing camps. He named his business Uwajima, after the town in Japan where he learned his trade. ("Ya" is "store" in Japanese.)



Akira Moriguchi, president and chief operating officer of Uwajimaya, has been an owner of Uwajimaya since 1961 when his father gave each of his four sons 25% of the business. This was unusual, Moriguchi said, because in Asian cultures the family business usually goes to the eldest son, so the seven Moriguchi siblings assumed Uwajimaya would go to their brother Kenzo. Akira and Tomio had become engineers and were working for Boeing, and youngest brother Toshi

had become a chemist. In 1965 the business was incorporated and the three sisters also assumed ownership.

After the United States entered World War II the Moriguchis were sent to an internment camp in California. After the war the family relocated to Seattle and opened a retail store and fish cake manufacturing company. Today Uwajimaya includes wholesale, food processing, food service, export divisions, and Asian food and gift markets retail locations in Seattle, Bellevue, and Beaverton, Oregon.

The Seattle World's Fair in 1962 helped increase Uwajimaya's popularity. "My dad had already pushed us to go beyond the Japanese market," said Moriguchi. "He had an appreciation for all ethnic groups, particularly Asian."

The family is close knit. All seven siblings attended the same elementary, middle, and high schools. All, except one, attended the University of Washington. All seven live within the Seattle city limits. And, except for one, all work for Uwajimaya. "We all grew up in the store," said Moriguchi. "At that time the store was at 5th and Main Streets in. After school we all ended up there. We had to do our chores before we could eat."

Moriguchi says the advantage of being a family-owned business is being able to implicitly trust each other. "A disadvantage," he said laughingly, "is that sometimes we're not sure if we're having a family dinner or a board of directors meeting. It is important, but sometimes difficult, to separate business from family."

Twice Uwajimaya has turned to the SBA for small business loans. In 1968 Uwajimaya received a \$50,000 7(a) guaranteed loan; in 1974 Uwajimaya received a \$225,000 7(a) guaranteed loan.

In September 2002 Moriguchi was keynote speaker at the sixth annual Biz Fair, Washington's largest free small business fair. This year 1,100 people attended Biz Fair. The SBA Seattle District Office is a member of the Fair's organizing committee, and participates as an exhibitor each year.

The opening of Uwajimaya Inc.'s Asian grocery store at Uwajimaya Village complex in the International District of Seattle in October 2001 helped the company increase sales from \$75 million in 2000 to \$88 million in 2001. This year Moriguchi estimates that Uwajimaya, Inc. sales will reach \$95 million, about half of that from its retail stores. Uwajimaya has also faced tough times, most notably in the early 1970s. Those were the years when Boeing went from 130,000 to 40,000 employees in three years, and Seattle had the notorious billboard, "Will the last one to leave Seattle please turn out the lights."

Moriguchi derives immense satisfaction from running the business. He says he is motivated by working hard for the family as a whole. "I'm pleased that Uwajimaya has created meaningful employment for 500 people," said Moriguchi. "It has also helped promote understanding of Asian cultures in the general population."

Uwajimaya serves its customers as well as the community at large. It sponsors cultural events and shows, and supports and contributes to many local programs and organizations. The Seattle Uwajimaya store serves as an important focal point of Seattle's Chinatown International District and the region's diverse Asian community, which is the fastest growing segment of the area's population. Uwajimaya plans to keep on growing, and is exploring store sites in Tacoma and north of Seattle.